My Teenage Hero: Byron Rumford, Fair Housing Champion
April 2024
Linda Wing

Recently, I participated in UC Berkeley's Black History Tour. I learned about the experiences of Black students and faculty spanning nearly 90 years, from the 19th century, when the first Black student enrolled in 1881, to the 20th century, when Black students demanded a Black Studies Program in 1968. As a follow-up to the tour, I explored the university's Black History website. I was excited to discover that Byron Rumford was a Cal alumnus. When I was a junior in high school, Assemblyman Rumford was my hero. He was a key figure in my coming of age.

Who Was Byron Rumford?

Byron Rumford was the author of the 1963 California Fair Housing Act, also known as the Rumford Act. The law, as he originally envisioned it, was Assemblyman Rumford's moonshot. He aimed to do no less than prohibit racial discrimination in the sale and rental of public and private housing throughout the state. When Mr. Rumford introduced a bill towards that end, it was met with fierce opposition. A battle ensued.

The resistance was led by state legislators who were allies of a 500-pound gorilla – the California Real Estate Association. They proposed more than 100 amendments. The bill survived the avalanche, but its scope was narrowed to focus on "homes only if they had publicly assisted financing" and privately financed housing "with not more than four units, one of which was occupied by the owner."

After the modified bill passed and became law, resistance to fair housing continued. In 1964, a majority of California voters passed Proposition 14. The proposition voided the Rumford Act by creating a constitutional right for California property owners to refuse to sell, lease, or rent residential properties to anyone, for any reason. A vigorous court challenge led to the California Supreme Court's 1966 decision to declare Proposition 14 unconstitutional because it violated the 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal protection under the law. The decision was appealed, but the US Supreme Court upheld the state court's ruling in 1967.

Ultimately, Assemblyman Rumford prevailed not only in California but also the nation. The Rumford Act became the progenitor of the landmark Title VIII of the 1968 Civil Rights Act. Title VIII prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing based on race, color, religion, sex, disability, family status, and national origin. Byron Rumford's moonshot had finally landed.

How Did the 16-Year-Old Who Was Me Come to Revere a Fair Housing Champion?

In 1954, my parents attempted to buy their first home in Sacramento, California. My father was a WWII veteran, and both my parents were Cal graduates. They made offers on several houses, all of which were rejected on the basis of our family's race. Nevertheless, Mom and Dad decided to persist in their search for a home. Upon overhearing their conversation, my five-year-old sister offered our parents this advice: "Next time, don't tell them we're Chinese."

Mom and Dad laughed, their tension relieved by this unexpected moment of tragicomedy. They gave my sister a hug of thanks for her love and loyalty.

My parents eventually succeeded in buying a house in a new development. After our family moved in, Mom and Dad received a petition signed by the residents on our block. The document indicated that life would be better for the children in our family and the children in their families if our family left the neighborhood. We were the first people of color to move into the development, and it was clear that we were not welcomed. It was under these circumstances that I began third grade at the neighborhood school three blocks away from home. I was the school's first and only student of color. It's a fact of American life: when housing is segregated, schools are segregated.

Years later, at age 16, I found solace when I went on a high school field trip to the state capitol. My teacher, Mr. Mahan, took our U.S. Government class to a legislative hearing on a new bill, the fair housing bill. It was at the hearing that I learned about Assemblyman Rumford and his commitment to ensure that every family, including mine, would enjoy fair housing opportunities, not exclusion based on race. He understood that home is where the heart is; it is, at once, a basic human need and a symbol of the American Dream.

I learned firsthand about opposition to fair housing as well. The chair of the committee conducting the hearing ejected a priest and two nuns who stood in silent support of the bill to stop what he claimed was their disruption of the proceedings. Subsequently, the chair publicly announced that his committee would never approve a bill prohibiting discrimination in private residential housing.

Assemblyman Rumford was calm, deliberate, and tireless in sustaining his efforts to bring fair housing to California residents. In the face of a powerful real estate industry, he rallied the support of ordinary people.

That Assemblyman Rumford made the concept of fair housing important and meaningful to ordinary people was evident in the persons of the priest and nuns who had been ejected from the assembly hearing. They were not alone. One day, my teacher, Mr. Mahan, was absent from school. We students wondered why. When he returned to class, Mr. Mahan explained that he had been arrested for participating in a pro-fair-housing occupation of the capitol rotunda.

Concerned that the fair housing bill might be shelved at the end of the legislative calendar, Assembly Rumford mobilized key senators and assemblymen to make canny use of parliamentary procedures to advance the bill to roll call votes. On June 21, the legislature's last day in session, the State Senate began a roll call vote at 11:00 pm. The fair housing bill was approved by a count of 26 to 16. The bill was then sent to the State Assembly where fair housing faced greater peril than in the senate. A roll call vote started at 11:38 pm. At 11:50 pm, the bill was passed – to a standing ovation, reportedly the first in the history of the assembly. The governor signed the Rumford Fair Housing Act into law on July 18, 1963. It became effective in September 1963.

And so it was that I came to heroize Byron Rumford. He was a key figure in my adolescent identity development. Because of Assemblyman Rumford, I discovered that my family was not alone in experiencing racial discrimination when trying to find a home. Equally important, I learned that families of color were not the problem. Racial inequalities were built into housing policies and markets across all localities. In Mr. Rumford's example, I saw that the problem was not intractable. With measured leadership, he catalyzed collective action among ordinary people and elected officials to enact legislation to expand fair housing to all. Opposition was formidable, setbacks occurred, yet the assemblyman persisted. I am grateful that I was in the right place at the right time to learn these life lessons at age 16.

Life-size bronze statue of Byron Rumford, formally known as William Byron Rumford. Erected in 2016 on Sacramento Street at Julia Street in Berkeley, California. Sculpture by artist Dana King.

Afterword

Byron Rumford earned not one but three degrees from the University of California. He was awarded a Pharmacy G degree from the University of California San Francisco in 1931, a BA in political science from the University of California Berkeley in 1948, and an MA in public administration from Cal in 1959. Remarkably, Mr. Rumford was elected to his first term in the California State Assembly in that same year that he received his BA and won passage of the California Fair Employment Practices Act in the same year he earned his MA. The fair employment act was the first of two seminal civil rights laws that he spearheaded, the second was the fair housing act.

Clearly, Byron Rumford was determined to learn more in order to do more as a public servant. In the tradition of Black history at Cal, he placed extraordinary value on education as

empowerment to advance equality, justice, and civil rights. His example inspired me to devote my career as a high school and then college teacher to the exact same mission.

Note: In May 2024, a slightly different version this article, entitled “Byron Rumford and Black History at Cal: Fiat Lux” was posted to the blog of the UC Berkeley Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at https://olli.berkeley.edu/blog/byron-rumford-and-black-history-cal-fiat-lux and to *East Wind Ezine* at https://eastwindezine.com/byron-rumford-and-black-history-at-cal-fiat-lux/.